# The Future of the State: Kern County's Young, Growing, Diverse Population and Dynamic Economy

## SUMMARY

Kern County occupies a unique position—at the center of the state, at the forefront of its population growth, and in one of the nation's largest agricultural and energy producing regions. In recent years, reports have noted that Kern County has fostered an "open-for-business" (Hamilton et al. 2015, 2) climate. But what exactly does "open-for-business" mean for Kern County workers?

In this report, we examine several features of Kern's distinctive population and economy. In per capita terms, Kern County's economy grew faster between 2000 and 2009 than any other county in the state—but then shrank more than all but two California counties. We also find that workers have experienced extreme inequality in Kern, and that Kern worker disadvantage has only grown over time.

The findings have implications for California's new approach to economic development—the high road model. How local stakeholders engage with these findings for regional economic development will have consequences for shared prosperity between business and workers.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. Kern County is the tenth most populous California county, with 873,334 residents. Between 2000 and 2019, **Kern's population grew by 41%, and its workforce grew by 51%,** both **third-highest** in the state.

2. Kern is one of the **youngest counties** in California. It has the state's third-youngest median age (31), and fourth-highest rate of residents under the age of five (7.8%).

3. Kern's population is **diverse**. Kern has the fifth most Latino population in the state (55%), and immigrants are one in five (20%) residents.

4. Kern's workforce will **quickly change**, from many migrants to many native-born workers. Nearly one in three (31%) of workers aged 55-64 are migrants, yet of those aged 15-24 and entering the workforce only 8% are migrants.

5. Kern's **per capita GDP growth has been highly volatile**; it grew more than any other California county between 2000 and 2009, at 34.9%. Yet, since 2009, Kern's per capita GDP shrank by 4.4%—third-worst in the state.

6. Since 2009, **22 of 30 industries in Kern experienced job growth**. Among the highest were: warehousing (552%); animal production (220%); non-oil and gas mining (215%); forestry, fishing and hunting (193%); building services (90%), and utilities (72%).

7. Kern **workers' earnings decline** have been singularly worst among all California counties. In 1979, Kern workers earned a median wage of $34,451 (in 2019 dollars), identical to US workers outside of California. Yet since 1979 Kern workers' median wages have declined 13%.

8. Kern workers are among the state's most **disadvantaged**, even after adjusting for local cost of living. Four out of ten (40%) Kern workers lived below a living wage in 2019, third-worst in the state. Nearly one in two (48%) workers in Southeast Bakersfield lived below a living wage (See Appendix A for living wage thresholds).

## INTRODUCTION

In June 2017, the California Workforce Development Board founded the High Road Training Partnership (HRTP), an innovative initiative to advance economic and workforce development in the state. The HRTP is premised on a "high road" approach, characterized by "industry-led" and "worker-centered partnerships" (UCLA Labor Center, undated). Its first investment, $10 million over eighteen months, provided public funding for partnerships in eight industry sectors, including healthcare, hospitality, transit, freight, water and wastewater, building operations, public sector, and transportation, distribution and logistics (Gonzalez-Vasquez and Lopez 2021, 1). The three goals of the HRTP were job quality, equity, and the climate (California Workforce Development Board 2018) (see Appendix B).

The State of California has since made the high road approach foundational in its approach to economic and workforce development. A June 2020 report commissioned by the California Workforce Development Board, "Putting California on the High Road," articulated the high road framework as a key strategy for the state's efforts to advance on ambitious climate goals—reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2035 and becoming carbon-neutral by 2045 (e.g. Zabin et al. 2020). Later, as a response to the COVID-19 economic and public health crisis, California Governor Gavin Newsom introduced the $750 million Community Economic Resilience Fund (CERF); the CERF was designed as a "high road" strategy, funding high road transition collaboratives and implementation grants (Governor's Office of Planning and Research 2021).

The Kern High Road Coalition, founded in October 2020 and consisting of three co-convenors (Bakersfield College; UC Merced Community and Labor Center; and Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment), is currently leading the development of a Strategic Workforce Development Plan in Kern County under California's HRTP initiative.

The Kern High Road coalition will convene several labor, community and environmental justice partners, around issue areas of interest to high road employers, worker organizations, disadvantaged communities, and climate groups. It will also foster collaborations that advance the state's interest in high road economic development. The release of this report is the first step.

Research on economic development in Kern County has highlighted several distinctive features of Kern: reliance on energy production (e.g. Kern Economic Development Foundation 2021), the number of good jobs and high pay in energy sectors, tremendous job growth (e.g. Hamilton et al. 2015), and the contributions of oil and gas to local property tax revenue streams (e.g. Natelson Dale Group 2020). Yet key questions remained about worker prosperity.

This report examines Kern County's population, economy, and workers. We utilize several public data sources: 1980-2000 US Census Decennial data; 2009-2019 American Community Survey microdata; and 2001-2020 US Bureau of Economic Analysis data.

The data in this report suggest that key assumptions must be reconsidered for high road economic development to be advanced in Kern. First, Kern's tremendous economic and job growth has been driven in large part by population growth. Second, Kern's massive population and job growth has been accompanied by the worst decline in worker earnings in the state.

Our report ends with the implications of Kern's young, growing, and dynamic population and workforce, and the need for high road approaches to economic development.

**Table 1.1 Kern County Profile, 2019**

| | | | County area rank |
|---|---|---:|---|
| *Household* | Average household size | 2.9 | 12th-highest |
| *Characteristics* | Multiple families per 100 households | 9 | 19th-highest |
| | | | |
| *Individual* | Median age | 31 | 3rd-youngest |
| *Characteristics* | Age 0-4 | 8% | 3rd-highest |
| | Age 0-17 | 30% | 4th-highest |
| | Immigrant | 20% | 16th-lowest |
| | Median year of arrival | 1996 | 20th-most recent |
| | Non-English speaker | 17% | 11th-highest |
| | | | |
| *Workforce* | Labor force participation, age 16-65 | 60% | 3rd-lowest |
| *Characteristics* | Unemployed | 8% | 6th-highest |
| | Growth in workers, 1999-2019 | 51% | 3rd-highest |
| | Change in median wages, 1979-2019 | -13% | 1st-lowest |

*Note: For small counties (population <150,000), PUMAs are used as county areas.*

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS- USA American Community Survey 2019 Public Use Microdata Series (PUMS) data
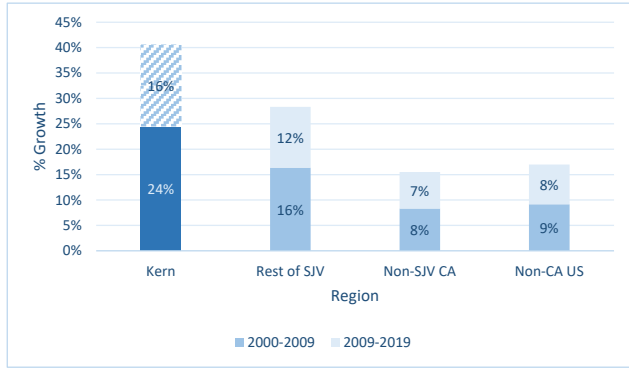
## POPULATION

**Household Characteristics.** Kern is one of the largest counties in California. In 2019, it had 272,889 households and 873,334 persons and was the tenth most populous county in the state. Kern's household characteristics were slightly above average in size; its average household size was 2.9 persons, and for every 100 households there were 9 families living in households that were not their own (see table 1.1).

**Center of Population.** Kern County was also symbolic of California. In 2022, the US Census Bureau declared Smith Corner, an unincorporated area 1.5 miles south of Shafter in Kern County, the "mean center of population" in California (Census 2022); Smith Corner lies at the mid-point of the state's distribution of its residents. In addition, Kern has experienced demographic growth and change—two characteristics long associated with the state.

**Youth and Growth.** In 2019, Kern's youthfulness and population growth stood out among California counties. Kern County residents had a median age of 31 years (see figure 1.2), third-youngest among California counties. The county also had a high rate of children; one in thirteen (7.8%) Kern residents were under the age of five, fourth-highest in the state—only behind its neighboring counties of Kings (8.6%) and Tulare (8.0%), and Imperial (8.6%). In addition, nearly three in ten (29.6%) Kern residents were under the age of 18. This was fifth-highest in the state, only behind other rural counties (Tulare 30.8%; Imperial 30.2%; Kings 29.8%; and Merced 29.7%).

**Diversity.** Kern County's diversity was unique among California Counties. Latino residents numbered 477,787, more than half (55%) of the county's residents and the fifth-highest percentage in the state (see figure 1.3).

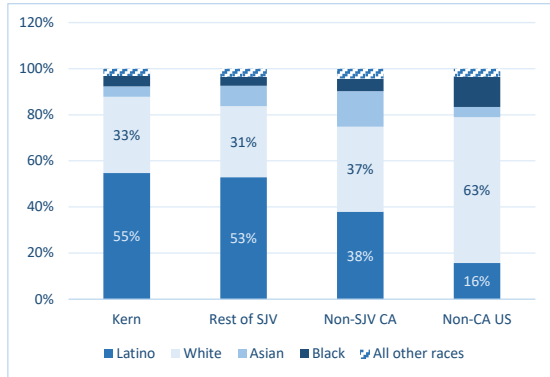**Figure 1.1 Household population growth, by area, between 2000-2019**



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA US Census Decennial 2000 5% file; IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

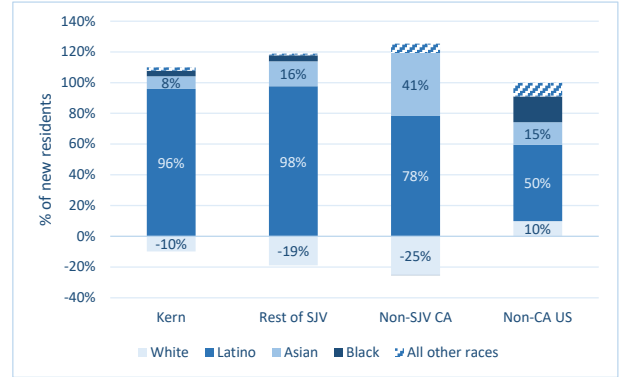**Figure 1.2 Median age of population, by area, 2019**
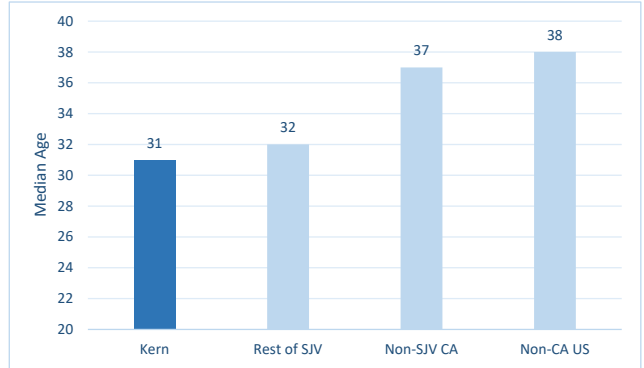


Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

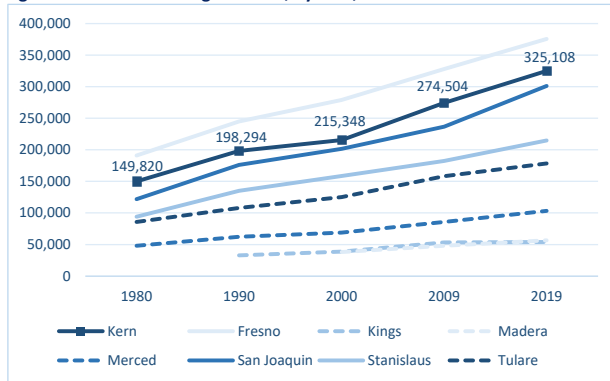**Figure 1.3 Race distribution, by area, 2019**



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

**Figure 1.4 Race as share of new residents, by area, 2009-2019**
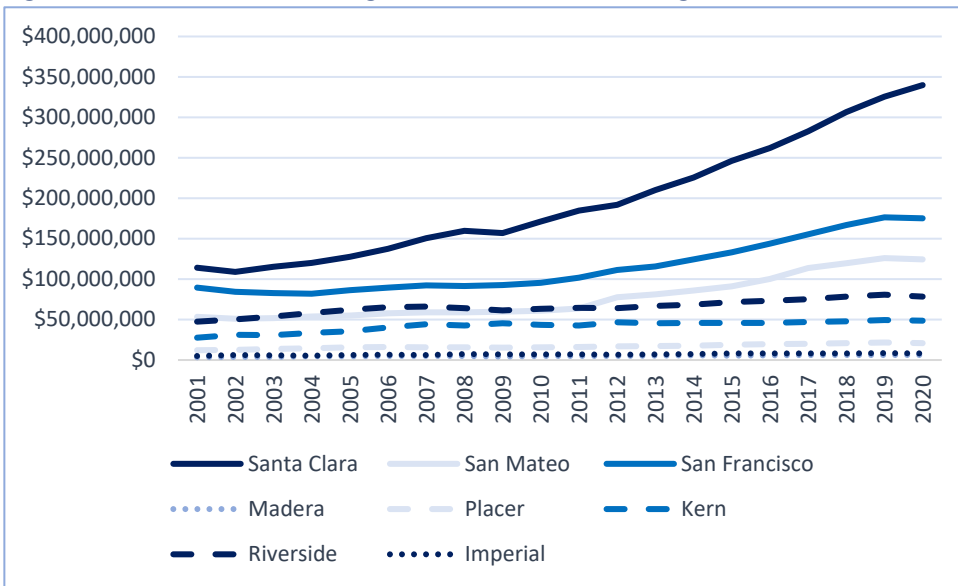


Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

**Figure 1.5 Number of wage earners, by area, 1980-2019**



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA US Census Decennial 1980-2000 5% files; IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

**Figure 2.1 Counties with GDP growth above state average, California 2001-2019**



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2001-2020 data

Note: All GDP figures in thousands of chained 2012 dollars

One in three residents (33%) were non-Hispanic white, while a much smaller minority of residents were Asian (5%), Black (5%) or persons who self-identified as another race (3%). These figures were similar to the rest of the San Joaquin Valley, though outside of the San Joaquin Valley, California had a lower percentage of residents who were Latino (38%) and a higher percentage of residents who were Asian (15%).

**Immigration.** Kern was also characterized by diversity in national origin and language. One in five (20%) Kern residents were immigrant. In addition, the immigrant population was long-settled; the median year of arrival to the US for immigrants living in Kern was 1996 (see table 1.1). The county's percentage of immigrants has remained at 20% since 2009. Nonetheless, despite having a largely long-settled immigrant population, nearly one in five (17%) Kern residents did not speak English "very well" (see table 1.1).

**Racial Change.** Kern County's population grew by 41% between 2000 and 2019, the third-highest rate in the state (see figure 1.1). For every 100 residents that the county had increased in population, 96 were new Latino residents, 8 were Asian, 6 were of other races, and 10 white residents had moved out (see figure 1.4).

**Labor Market Growth.** Kern's dramatic population growth fueled tremendous economic and labor market growth. Between 2000 and 2019, the number of workers in Kern County grew by 51% (see figure 1.5), this was third-highest in the state.

**Labor Market Demographic Change.** Kern's population growth and demographic changes will soon substantially reshape the labor market with declining numbers of white or immigrant workers, and increasing numbers of native-born Latino workers. Whereas thirty-one percent of workers aged 55-64 in 2019 were immigrants, only eight percent of persons aged 15-24 and two percent of persons aged 5-14 were immigrants (analysis not shown). In addition, while forty percent of workers aged 55-64 were Latino, sixty-five percent of persons aged 5-14 or 15-24 were Latino.

**Table 2.1 Top 5 California counties with *highest per capita* economic growth, 2001-2009**

| Rank | County | 2001 | | 2009 | | 2001-2009 |
|------|--------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | | GDP | Pop. | GDP | Pop. | Growth |
| 1 | Kern | $27,651,931 | 633,062 | $45,552,481 | 773,070 | 34.9% |
| 2 | Santa Clara | $114,240,305 | 1,660,641 | $156,929,380 | 1,750,586 | 30.3% |
| 3 | Ventura | $37,003,295 | 749,315 | $50,423,666 | 794,761 | 28.5% |
| 4 | Santa Barbara | $17,976,028 | 387,372 | $22,573,538 | 391,857 | 24.1% |
| 5 | Solano | $15,161,616 | 387,622 | $18,152,088 | 397,164 | 16.8% |
| | California | $1,692,324,096 | 33,534,644 | $1,995,439,659 | 36,115,231 | 9.5% |

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2001-2009 data

Note: All GDP figures in thousands of chained 2012 dollars

**Table 2.2 Top 5 California counties with *lowest per capita* economic growth, 2009-2019**

| Rank | County | 2009 | | 2019 | | 2009-2019 |
|------|--------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | | GDP | Pop. | GDP | Pop. | Growth |
| 1 | Contra Costa | $80,291,378 | 1,031,159 | $79,295,699 | 1,143,695 | -11.0% |
| 2 | Ventura | $50,423,666 | 794,761 | $47,846,529 | 832,609 | -9.4% |
| 3 | Kern | $45,552,481 | 773,070 | $49,221,208 | 873,334 | -4.4% |
| 4 | Humboldt | $4,678,757 | 125,980 | $5,185,967 | 131,586 | 6.1% |
| 5 | San Joaquin | $23,369,038 | 645,592 | $28,686,598 | 741,237 | 6.9% |
| | California | $1,995,439,659 | 36,115,231 | $2,739,343,439 | 38,668,104 | 28.2% |

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2009-2019 data

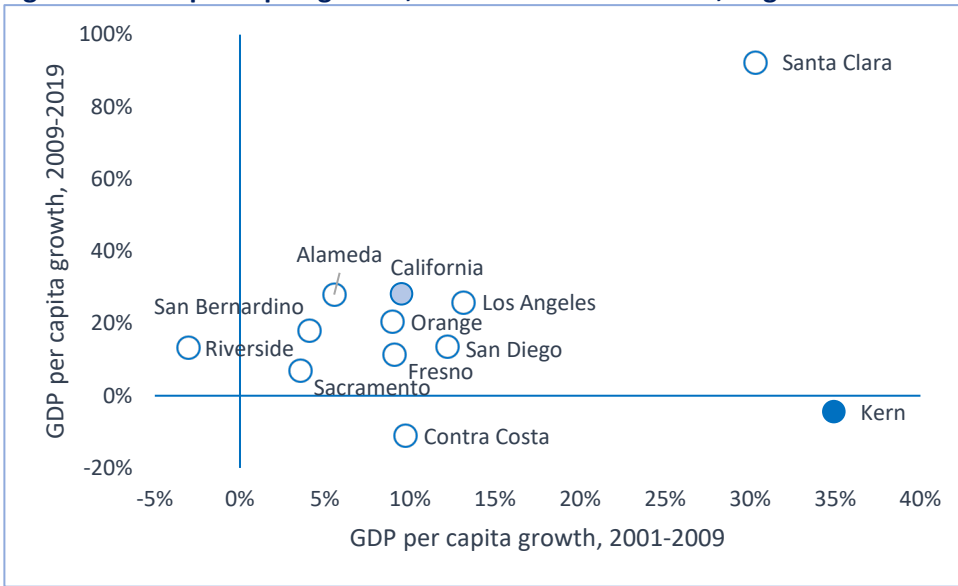Note: All GDP figures in thousands of chained 2012 dollars

## ECONOMY

**GDP Growth.** Kern County's economy experienced tremendous overall growth in gross domestic product (GDP) between 2001 and 2019—in fact, among the state's highest. This obscures, however, the fact that population growth fueled such tremendous growth. Adjusted for inflation and population, Kern experienced extreme economic volatility; Kern's economy was characterized by the state's highest GDP growth between 2001 and 2009—but among the state's worst after 2009.

Only eight California counties experienced GDP growth (in chained 2012 dollars) above the state's average between 2001

**Figure 2.2 GDP per capita growth, 2001-2009 vs 2009-2019, largest 11 California counties**



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau
of Economic Analysis 2001-2019 data

Note: All GDP figures in chained 2012 dollars

and 2020 (see figure 2.1). Three counties in or adjacent to Silicon Valley (Santa Clara, San Mateo, and San Francisco) experienced the greatest GDP growth, while five inland counties also experienced GDP growth above the state's average: Madera, Placer, Kern, Riverside, and Imperial counties. Kern's GDP increase, from $28 billion in 2001 to $46 billion in 2009, was fifth highest in the state.

**GDP Growth, 2001-2009.** Adjusted for population, Kern County's 2001-2009 GDP growth was actually the highest in California. Between 2001 and 2009, Kern County's per capita GDP grew by 34.9% (see table 2.1). Such growth was higher than that in Santa Clara County (30.3%), Ventura (28.5%), Santa Barbara (24.1%), and Solano (16.8%). Kern's per capita GDP growth (34.9%) was nearly four times greater than that of the state (9.5%).
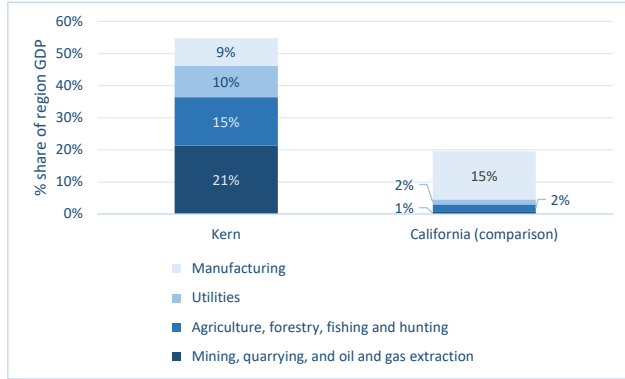
**GDP Contraction, 2009-2019.** Kern County's economic growth between 2009 and 2019, however, ranked among the state's worst. Between 2009 and 2019, Kern's GDP per capita grew from $45.6 billion to $49.2 billion (see table

2.2). But while this was an increase in absolute terms, it was a decline relative to its population growth. Adjusted per capita, Kern's GDP actually shrank by 4.4% between 2009 and 2019. Only Contra Costa (-11.0%) and Ventura (-9.4%) fared worse. All other counties in California experienced positive per capita GDP growth between 2009 and 2019. The state average for the period was 28.2%.

No other California county besides Kern County experienced greater GDP growth in the first decade of the century yet worse growth during the second decade (see figure 2.2).
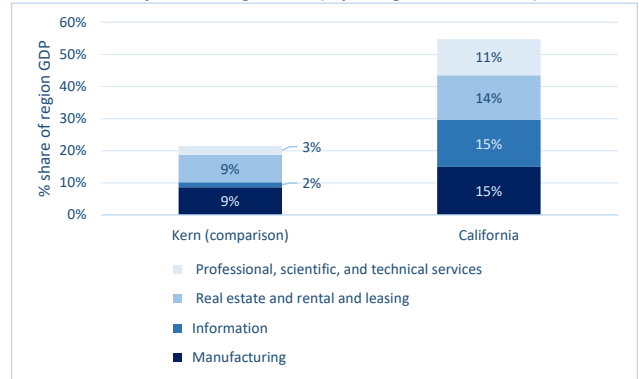
**Industry GDP.** Kern County is also distinct in its industry profile. Kern County's GDP is dominated by four major industries: mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction (21%); agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting (15%); utilities (10%); and manufacturing (9%) (see table 3.1). These four sectors comprised more than half (55%) of Kern County's GDP in 2019. By comparison, these four sectors only comprised 20% of the state's GDP. The disparity between the industry share of Kern's top three sectors

**Table 3.1 Industry share of region GDP (top-5 largest Kern industries), 2019**



Legend:
- Manufacturing
- Utilities
- Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting
- Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2019 data

**Table 3.2 Industry share of region GDP (top-5 largest CA industries) 2019**



Legend:
- Professional, scientific, and technical services
- Real estate and rental and leasing
- Information
- Manufacturing

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2019 data

**Table 3.3 Most and least resilient Kern County industries, 2019-2020**
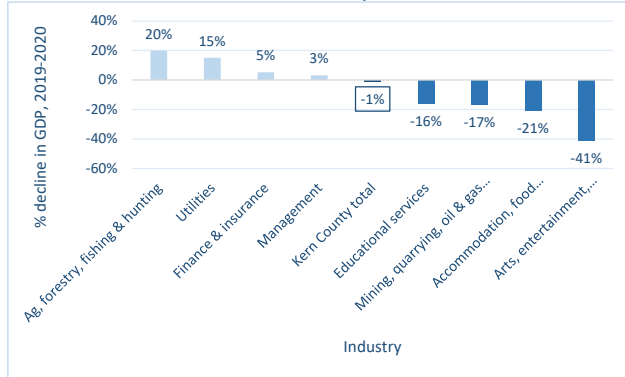


Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2019-2020 data

**Figure 4.1 Kern Industries with greatest job gains, 2009-2019**
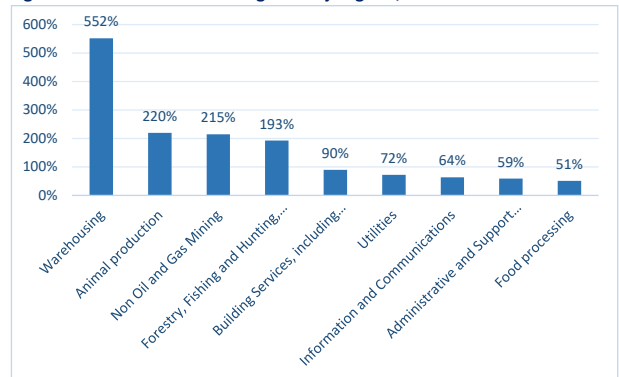


Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

**Figure 4.2 Kern Industries with greatest job losses, 2009-2019**
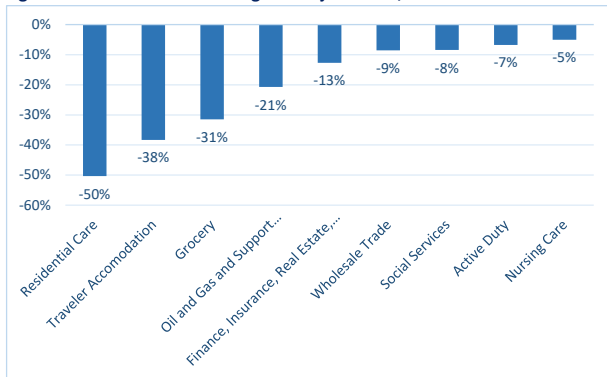


Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

and their share of California (46% versus 5%) was even more striking. In contrast, in 2019, manufacturing, information, real estate, and professional/scientific/technical services constituted the majority (55%) of California's GDP but only 22% of Kern County's GDP (see table 3.2).

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2019 and 2020, four Kern industries declined in GDP: arts, entertainment and recreation (-41%); accommodation and food services (21%); mining, quarrying, oil & gas extraction (-17%); and educational services (-16%) (see table 3.3).

At the same time, four industry sectors appeared especially resilient despite the pandemic. GDP grew for agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting (20%); utilities (15%); finance & insurance (5%); and management (3%).

## LABOR MARKET

**Job Growth.** Kern County's labor market profile has also been characterized by constant and tremendous job growth. Owing to regional population growth trends, the size of Kern's labor market grew by 51% between 2000 and 2019--third-highest in the state behind only Riverside (80%) and Placer (66%). In 1999, Kern County had 215,348 wage earners, and this figure increased to 325,108 by 2019.

In 2019, agriculture had the greatest number of workers in Kern, with 33,398 workers. This formed 11% of Kern's total labor market. Other large industry sectors included educational services (9%); health (8%); public administration (7%); retail trade (7%); restaurants and other food services (6%); and construction (6%). These seven industries comprised 171,243 workers, more than half (54%) of Kern County's total workforce of 317,133.

When compared with the rest of the region, state, and nation, Kern County's top-ten industry workforce figures were very similar-- with a few exceptions. Kern had a far larger

agricultural workforce (11%) compared with the rest of the state (Non-SJV California 1%), and a smaller number of workers in manufacturing (4%) and professional/scientific/management jobs (4%) compared with the rest of the state (Non-SJV California 9%, 9%).

**Industry Job Growth.** Owing in large part to Kern's tremendous population growth, jobs in most Kern industry sectors (22 of 30) grew between the Great Recession of 2009 and 2019 (the most recent year of reliable American Community Survey data). Warehousing grew by far the most, with a 552% increase in jobs (see figure 4.1); this was higher than for the rest of the region, state and nation (analysis not shown). Other industries with substantial increases in workers included animal production (220%); non- oil & gas mining (215%); forestry, fishing and hunting (193%); building services (90%), and utilities (72%) (see figure 4.1).

**Industry Job Contraction.** Jobs decreased in eight Kern industry sectors between 2009 and 2019, however. In fact, five industries experienced double-digit negative percentage losses of workers: residential care (-50%), traveler accommodations (-38%), grocery (-31%), oil and gas (-21%), and finance (-13%) (see figure 4.2).

**Work Inequalities.** Kern County's labor market profile is also marked by severe disadvantage. Despite such overall labor market growth, the county had the state's third-lowest rate (60%) of persons aged 16-65 in the labor force. Kern also had the sixth-highest rate of unemployment. And adjusted for inflation, Kern workers' median wages decreased by 9% between 2009 and 2019—the second-worst change in the state (analysis not shown). Overall GDP growth has not translated into higher wages for the average Kern worker.

**California's greatest workers' earnings loss, 1979-2019.** The decline in Kern County workers' median annual earnings is also striking in a regional, state and national context. In 1979, Kern workers earned a median of $34,451—the

**Figure 4.3 Median wage and salary income (in 2019 dollars), by area, 1979-2019**
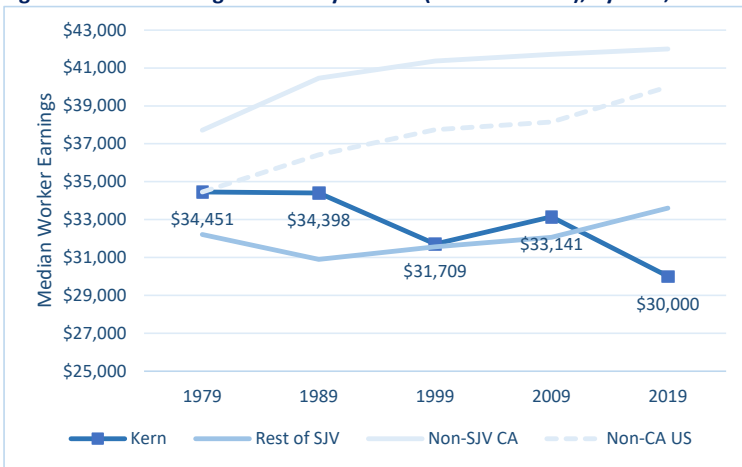


Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA US Census Decennial 1980-2000 5% files; IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

**Figure 4.4 Percent of wage earners living under a living wage, by county, 2019**
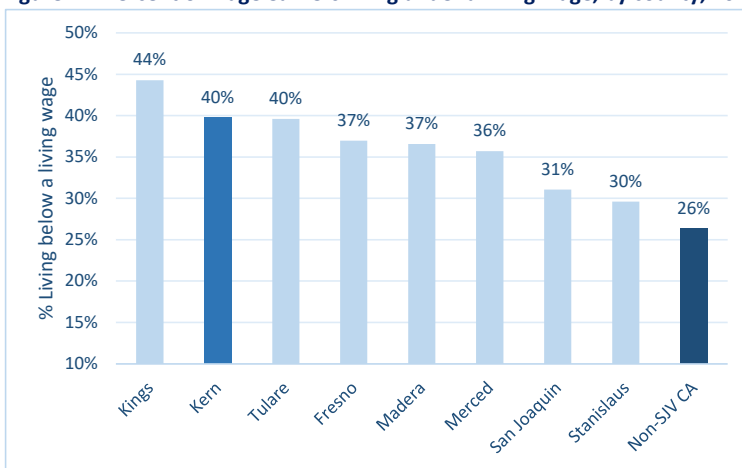


Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

**Figure 4.5 Percent of wage earners living below a living wage, by Kern area, 2015-2019**
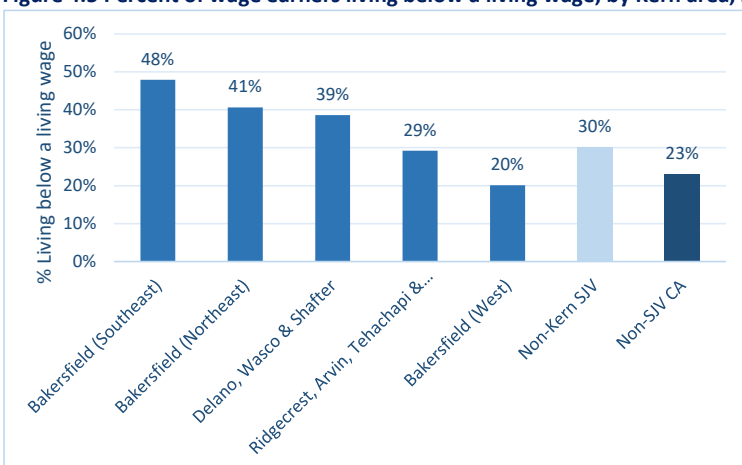


Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2015-2019, 5-year Public Use Microdata Series

same as that of US workers outside of California (see figure 4.3). By 2019, however, Kern workers' median annual earnings had decreased to $30,000. In contrast, median earnings had *increased* for workers in the rest of the San Joaquin Valley region, the state of California, and the United States. **The 13% decline in Kern workers' median wages since 1979 was singularly worst among all California counties (see table 1.1).**

**Living below a living wage.** Kern also experiences one of the highest percentages of wage earners living below a "living wage"— the amount needed to avoid "consistent and severe housing and food insecurity" (Nadeau 2018, 2). Four out of ten (40%) Kern workers lived below a living wage in 2019 (see figure 4.4), the third-worst rate in the state (analysis not shown). In the five-year period between 2015-2019, nearly one in two (48%) Southeast Bakersfield workers lived below a living wage, while West Bakersfield (20%) had a better rate—even lower than the rest of the state outside the San Joaquin Valley region (23%) (see figure 4.5).

## CONCLUSION

Kern County occupies a unique position—at the center of the state, at the forefront of its population growth, and in one of the nation's largest agricultural and energy producing regions. While previous research on economic development in Kern County had highlighted its reliance on energy production, the number of good jobs and high pay in energy sectors, and tremendous job growth, key questions remained about how a county that is "open-for-business" (Hamilton et al. 2015, 2) shares prosperity with workers.

This report finds that Kern County's dynamic population and economy exhibit several distinctive features necessary to understand for advancing innovative and inclusive forms of economic development. Kern is one of the most populous and fastest-growing counties in California. Its population is young and diverse, and will continue to change as older immigrants exit the labor market and younger native-born Latino residents enter.

While Kern County's economy has grown rapidly, this is mainly a function of the growth in the number of workers. Since 2009, Kern's per capita GDP growth has contracted. In addition, worker wages have declined in Kern more than any other California county since 1979. In this context, any proclamations of favorable conditions for local business owners obscure enormous worker disadvantage that must be addressed for equitable economic development to occur.

The California Workforce Development Board's High Road Training Partnership (HRTP) initiative provides an opportunity to meaningfully engage with processes of equitable economic development. The HRTP is premised on a "high road" approach, characterized by "industry-led" and "worker-centered partnerships" (UCLA Labor Center, undated). The three goals of the HRTP are job quality, equity, and the climate (California Workforce Development Board 2018).

This report, developed as part of the Kern High Road Coalition and funded by the HRTP initiative, finds that Kern County is distinct in its young, growing, and dynamic population and economy—but that there is need for high road approaches to economic development that ensure prosperity for all. In coming months, the Kern High Road Coalition will share this report and several more research products—such as findings from needs assessment surveys with community members and workers, and employers and industry leaders—to discuss how to advance equitable economic development initiatives.

Kern is the center and the future of the state, but also reflective of many regions across the US. How Kern leaders engage with the findings in this report and related equitable economic development initiatives will have implications not just for Kern but set a precedent for any region rich in natural resources in the state and beyond.

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**Appendix A. Living Wage Thresholds for Kern County, by Household Structure and Hourly Wage, for 2019**

|  | Number of Adults | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Children* | 1 adult | 2 adults (1 worker) | 2 adults (2 workers) |
| 0 | $11.82 | $18.84 | $9.42 |
| 1 | $25.78 | $23.69 | $14.35 |
| 2 | $31.99 | $26.44 | $17.43 |
| 3+ | $41.32 | $31.10 | $21.48 |

Source: Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2020)

**Appendix B. The Three Goals of the California Workforce Development Board's High Road Training Partnership Model**
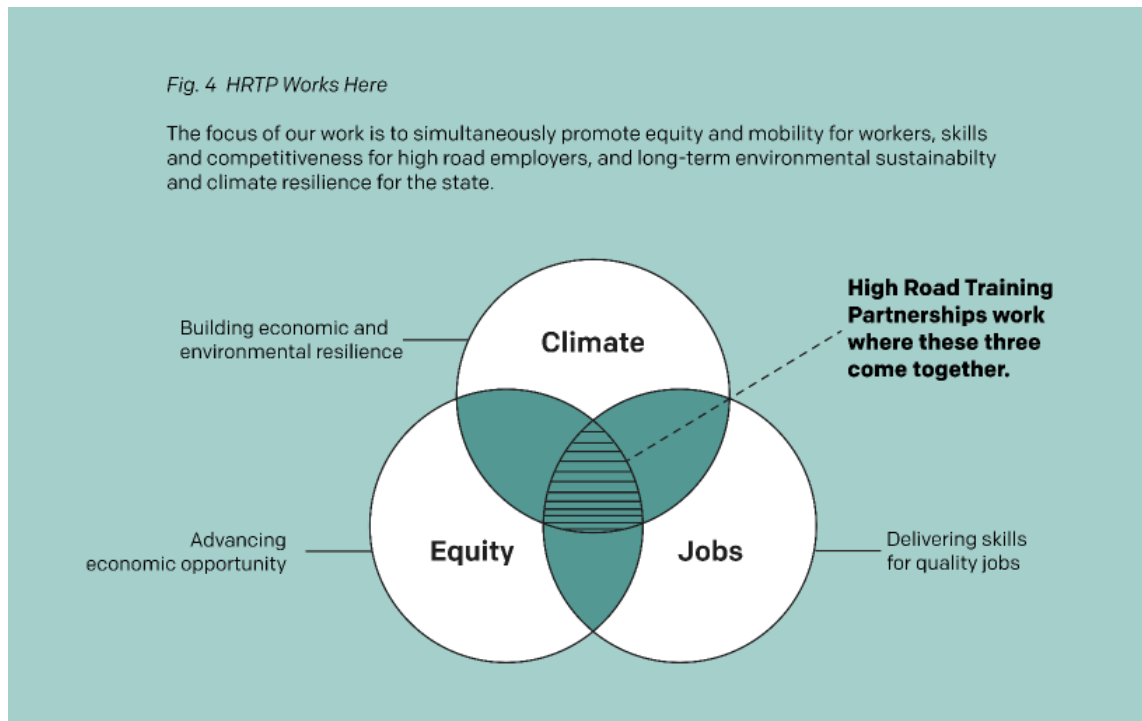


Credit: California Workforce Development Board (2018, 5)

## Mission Statement

The UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducts research and education on issues of community, labor and employment, in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.